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ABSTRACT

To meet the needs of undergraduate seminarians attending St. John's University in New York who are required to take speech communication courses and to appeal also to nonseminarian undergraduates, a Religious Communication minor was proposed. The minor consists of 18 credits in speech. In addition to arranging currently offered courses into a systematic program of study, a new course, the "Rhetoric of Religion" (Speech 43), was added. Speech 43 is designed to explore current issues in religious discourse, such as the secularization of the public sphere and the privatization of religious belief. The course is intended for all students interested in religion and communication. The relationship of religious discourse to the Western European rhetorical tradition will be discussed. Some discussion topics in the course are: religious ideas/concepts in classical rhetoric; Augustine's synthesis of classical rhetoric and Christian communication; the rhetoric of Catholic politicians such as Al Smith, John Kennedy, Mario Cuomo; and the discourse of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on social issues. One or more current books on religious discourse in the public sphere will be required. (NKA)

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ED 404 708

Developing a Religious Communication Minor at a Catholic University: Appealing to Seminarians and Undergraduates

Remarks prepared for the Panel:
Teaching Rhetoric and Religion: Challenges, Boundaries and Dilemmas

1996 Speech Communication Association Convention
San Diego

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Over the past several years, faculty members of the St. John's Speech Department have observed a fairly consistent enrollment of seminarians in various speech communication courses. Upon investigation, it was discovered that several of the groups of undergraduate seminarians attending St. John's are required to take several communication courses. In order to both effectively meet the needs of this student population and to appeal to interested nonseminarians, a Religious Communication minor was proposed. The minor consists of 18 credits in speech. In addition to the required Public Speaking core course, students may choose four of the following courses: Fundamentals of Speech Production, Oral Interpretation of Literature, Introduction to Interpersonal Communication, Persuasive Speaking, Foundations of Rhetorical Theory, Argumentation: Inquiry and Advocacy, and Rhetoric of Religion. The minor also requires one additional elective in speech.

In addition to arranging currently offered courses into a systematic program of study, a new course was proposed to enhance

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the Religious Communication minor. The course is called "Rhetoric of Religion" (Speech 43). Designed as an upper level rhetoric course, it is hoped that the new course will appeal to both seminarians and nonseminarians who have an interest in the role of religious discourse in American society. In order to justify adding a new course to the curriculum, a proposal was submitted to the Liberal Arts Faculty Council which included information under the following headings.

Rationale

Religious rhetoric has played a significant and often definitive role in public debate in America. Religious discourse has been problematized recently, however, by tendencies towards the secularization of the public sphere and the privatization of religious belief. Speech 43 is designed to explore these issues in a way that is helpful for students who take religious belief seriously and who aspire to participation and leadership in public affairs.

Speech 43 would further the mission of the University as a Catholic institution by focusing attention on an important dimension of rhetorical studies that is often neglected by nonreligious and state institutions. Speech 43 is not envisioned as a performance course nor is it to be confused with homiletical training. It is intended for all students interested in religion and communication as well as those preparing for the ministry. The course is being proposed in conjunction with the proposal to initiate a Religious Communication minor within the Speech

Department.

Description and Objectives

Catalog Description: The role of religious discourse in relation to the rhetorical tradition and contemporary society. The study of the intersection of religious rhetoric and socio-political issues.

Course Objectives: 1. Students will learn the relationship of religious discourse to the Western European rhetorical tradition, answering the question: How does religious communication fit into the wider field of communication?

2. Students will understand the status and role of religious discourse in American society past and present, answering the question: How does religious discourse occur in the context of social and political issues in America?

3. Students will come to appreciate Roman Catholic discourse as it has developed in relation to the American public sphere, answering the question: How has Catholic discourse adapted itself to the evolving American experiment in democracy?

Units of Instruction and Texts

I. The relationship of religious discourse to the Western European rhetorical tradition.

Topics for Lecture/Discussion:

*Religious ideas/concepts in classical rhetoric.

*Augustine's synthesis of classical rhetoric and Christian communication.

*Definitions of religious rhetoric(s).

II. The status and role of religious discourse in American society past and present.

Topics for Lecture/Discussion:

*Constitutional rhetoric of the "wall of separation."

*Religious rhetoric associated with various episodes in American history such as: Know Nothings, Civil War, Abolitionism, imperialism, progressivism, Scopes Trial, world wars, cold war, etc.

*The rhetoric of American "civil religion."

*Rhetorical strategies of representative "religious" politicians: William Jennings Bryan, Pat Robertson, Jesse Jackson, et. al.

*Secularization of American discourse, the "culture of disbelief."

*Religious discourse in America's "culture wars."

*The future of religious discourse in America in the 21st century.

III. Roman Catholic discourse as it has developed in relation to the American public sphere .

Topics for Lecture/Discussion:

*Rhetorical strategies in the Catholic quest for legitimacy.

*The rhetoric of Catholic politicians: Al Smith, John Kennedy, Mario Cuomo, et. al.

*Papal discourse in the American setting.

*The discourse of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on social issues.

Texts: One or more current books on religious discourse in the public sphere are required, e.g., The Naked Public Square (Neuhaus); Under God (Wills); Culture of Disbelief (Carter).